

Putting the Gay in Geisha

By Alan Bennett Ilagan

A fluttering of bamboo leaves brushes the paper window screen in the light breeze. Beams of late-afternoon sunlight fall onto the honey-hued wooden floor. A man slips into a silk kimono ~ a pattern of cranes and bamboo stalks, yellow and light green on an aqua background ~ the colors of early summer ~ rich, sumptuous, elegant, refined. He pulls it loosely around his naked body ~ fresh from a recent shower ~ luxuriating in the folds of sensual silk, and looks languorously out the window.

He lowers the paper shade and pads quietly across a seisel mat. Sitting down upon the floor, he sighs, lifts a bowl of tea to his lips, and gently sips. He will rest and meditate here before the evening's festivities. Soon he will have to entertain, to charm, to be witty, and to be judged. Is this the realm of a dying breed of geisha, or the preparatory routine of a gay man prior to a night on the town?

Are gay men the modern-day geisha? In Japan, geisha traditionally represented the world of the arts. (*Geisha* literally means "arts person"). Theater, drama, entertainment ~ these were the circles in which the geisha fluttered, and they are the same circles that many gay men traverse today. Whether genetic or learned, most of us have an affinity to what is collectively referred to as "the arts". It extends to other artful endeavors as well ~ interior decorating, painting, cooking, gardening, design, etc.

Fashion and appearance are highly important to both geisha and the gay man. To see and to be seen are the crux of our existence. Excelling at such entertainment was the lifeblood of the geisha. Knowing how to amuse and beguile a group of men is Basic Gay 101. Floating and flouncing from guest to guest, conferring coquettishly and laughing at every cheap joke ~ what legitimate queen doesn't know how to host a proper party? There is an art to these seemingly frivolous acts, and it is an art often cultivated in the hopes of finding the perfect partner. Geisha had clients ~ rich men who paid for their nights out, who kept the geisha in fine kimono and saw to it that the sake never stopped flowing. In our case, the clients are our prospective suitors, and we must entertain and enthrall with our appearance, charm, and clever banter.

From outward appearances it is a world of sophisticated, easy elegance ~ a life of parties and cocktails, dancing and fashion, impeccably designed apartments in the most desirable parts of town and the well-kept garden to match.

Yet it is, at its core, a business, and one of great effort and discipline. Yes, we jettison from party to party, dolled up in our finest low-cut Diesel jeans and Dolce & Gabbana ever-so-elegantly-ripped t-shirts, making the rounds, seeing and being seen, air-kissing dear acquaintances, and spreading our social seed, but no one witnesses the endless primping and

preparations that go into such effortless fabulousness. Getting ready for a night out at a club or bar is almost as elaborate a procedure as the geisha's intricate routine.

In his brilliant memoir *'Young Man From The Provinces'* Alan Helms describes his life as a gay man, and it rings eerily close to that of a geisha: "I was aware however that the life I was living was a lot of hard work & took a lot of time... I had to show up at a lot of social events, & endure a lot of flattery, & spend a lot of time at the gym, & make sure the clothes fit right, & balance a bewildering number of demands on my time. Just going to a party could consume half the day."

I've seen countless men gearing up for white parties, black parties, red parties, tea parties, and it always exhausts me to witness the work, labor, and thought that's involved. Living as a geisha came with a hefty price, as does living as a gay man. Both are cultures steeped in the importance of appearance, both value youth (most geisha stop performing in their 20's), and both can be terrifyingly lonely.

Lesley Downer quotes a geisha in her book *Women of the Pleasure Quarters: The Secret History of the Geisha*: "Nowadays fewer people are interested in teahouse parties. Geisha have no families. They live by themselves.... Being a geisha is not a normal job. It looks so pretty from the outside, always wearing a kimono. But inside it's harsh. If you think of that, it's not so pretty. It's a world of show. I want to go back to a normal life."

Gay men seem to be moving further away from our own tea dances and night-club bar culture, and into a realm where being gay does not define or have any real bearing on who we are. We can still enjoy those nights out, drinking and reveling and throwing it down, but I'd like to think we are much more than a troop of entertaining queens. There comes a time when we have to grow up – the extended adolescence of so many gay men who come out later in life will eventually come to an end and we will be left with far greater questions than which shoes go best with which outfit.

What is the function of the gay person in today's world? At this time of over-population and dwindling natural resources, when pro-creation is no longer a necessity (and some might say a danger), what purpose does the gay person serve? And, for that matter, what purpose does *anyone* serve?

What was the function of the geisha, then and now? Some scholars have suggested that the geisha are dying out, and that it's just a matter of time before they become completely irrelevant. As the relevance of the geisha wanes, so too may our role as "gays". A new definition of ourselves will be needed, one not based on sexuality but on something wholly different. The challenge of "What does it mean to be gay?" will be replaced by "What does it mean to be *me*?" It is the question that every human being struggles with, and being gay or geisha is no longer a complete answer.